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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the project reported here was to develop a model of strategies to facilitate parental access to schools and educational services and to increase parental understanding of school district procedures and practices. Other objectives of the project were as follows: improve participating parents' communication skills and self-confidence; increase parents' awareness of the effect of their expectations, attitudes, and involvement on their children's success in school; increase the sensitivity of teachers and other professionals regarding parents' apprehension about interacting with the school system; and increase educational interaction between parents and children. Educational professionals and human service agency staff identified and recruited 36 parents of special needs and at-risk children enrolled in the Keystone Central School District in Pennsylvania. A parent advocacy curriculum was developed and coordinated with workshops and classes already meeting at the local development center for adults. In the professional segment of the project, meetings were held with school professionals for the purpose of increasing their awareness of parent-teacher interaction issues, identifying issues they felt should be addressed in the parent classes, and gaining input on improving parent-professional interaction. Parent feedback regarding the project has been positive, and a project implementation manual has been developed. (MN)

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FAMILY ADVOCACY: THE PARENT/PROFESSIONAL TEAM

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July 1, 1991 - June 30, 1992

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Title: Family Advocacy: The Parent/Professional Team

Address: CIU #10 Development Center for Adults
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Phone (717) 893-4038

Funding: $13,078

Director: Linda Hinman

Number of Months: 12

Duration of Project: From: July 1, 1991 To: June 30, 1992

Objectives:

1. Develop a model of strategies to facilitate parental access to schools and educational services and increase parental understanding of school district procedures and practices.

2. Improve parental communication skills and self confidence necessary for effective interaction with school administrators and delivery staff.

3. Increase parental awareness of the effect their expectations, attitudes and involvement have on their children's success in school.

4. Increase sensitivity of teachers and other professionals to parents' apprehension about interacting with the school system.

5. Increase educational interaction between parent and child.

Description:

In ABE/GED classes we have adult students who are 2nd and 3rd generation high school dropouts talking about the problems their children are having in school. They perceive the school system as the problem and they don't see any solutions. In discussions with professionals from Keystone Central School District and local human service agencies we hear about uncooperative, uninvolved, seemingly uncaring parents. They perceive the parents to be the problem. We think this points to an undereducation cycle that requires intervention. This project proposes to break this cycle by increasing parental awareness of their roles in their children's education and empowering them to become advocates for their children. This project also proposes to increase the awareness and sensitivity of professionals to parental apprehensions and to help them develop strategies that will encourage parental participation.

Target Audience:

Project Family Advocacy will target 36 parents of special needs or at risk children enrolled in Keystone Central School District. Parents will be identified by educational professionals and human service agencies. Project Family Advocacy will also target professionals from local school district and human service agencies for participation in awareness sessions.

Product: A manual will be assembled and distributed through AdvancE.

Method of Evaluation:

1. Objective evaluation will measure the extent to which specific program objectives have been met.

2. Product evaluation will determine curriculum effectiveness through use of a materials evaluation by adult students and school district and human service agency professional staff.

INTRODUCTION

In our local Adult Basic Education programs we have had second and third generation high school dropouts from the same family. We heard undereducated parents talking about problems their children were having in school. They often said that they had the same difficulties in school and that's "just the way it is." They didn't see any possible solutions. Low level reading adults expressed the fear that their children wouldn't succeed in school because they couldn't help them with their homework. They weren't aware that they could teach the importance of education through their interest in and support of the educational system. These parents expected their children to fail and felt helpless to prevent it. We heard parents express frustration and anger about a school system that, according to them, was unresponsive to their needs and was now unresponsive to the needs of their children. They blamed the system but failed to realize that they were themselves partly responsible for the problem. They spoke of their failed attempts to talk with teachers or counselors about their children. Some felt rebuffed or criticized during a first attempt and were quite reluctant to attempt it again. Some saw the system as inaccessible to themselves and passed this attitude on to their children. We found parents who had a hard time coping with the welfare system or another public agency and who expected similar problems if they were to approach the school system. Some were intimidated and mistrustful of professionals in general. They saw professionals as adversaries who judged them or who told them how poorly they raised their children, how poorly their children did in school, or how they failed to meet the system's expectations. We also heard about feelings of powerlessness against the system. These parents felt anxiety about facing authority figures. Most weren't aware that they, as adults, had the power to affect the system, and they held some very big misconceptions about the educational system. It seemed these parents lacked the positive expectations and attitudes that would have encouraged

educational success for their children. They expected failure and their children lived up to their expectations.

In discussions with teachers and other professionals in the school system and at local human service agencies we heard them express frustration as well. They described parents as uncooperative and seemingly uncaring. They talked about the parents who didn't attend scheduled meetings or who didn't take advantage of help offered to them by the professionals. They had also expressed frustration in their attempts to change these patterns. They often found their efforts met with failure. They found what appeared to be uncooperative, uninterested, or even hostile responses from parents.

Both sides, the parents and the professionals, were seeing different sides of the same problem, and both wanted very much to solve it. We saw the problem as a part of an undereducation cycle. Intervention was needed or this cycle would continue. Through cooperative efforts with Keystone Central School District and the staffs of local human service agencies, Project Family Advocacy conducted classes and activities designed to lessen parental apprehensions, increase parental awareness of their rights, the regulations, and operating procedures of the school system, suggest strategies for advocating, and show the importance of their participation in their children's education.

While the parents were targeted for intervention, it was also evident that the professional staff of the school system impact the cycle. Through meetings with professionals in both human service agencies and the school system, we tried to increase their awareness and raise their sensitivity to parents' apprehensions and reluctance to access and participate in the system.

Project Family Advocacy conducted meetings with human service agencies, school district guidance counselors and principals, and parent groups in September and October. Parent classes began in November and ended in April.

Meetings with the teachers of the district occurred at their May faculty meetings.

The project model was designed to help educators who are working with parents interested in being more effective in their interactions with the school system or a human service agency. Project Family Advocacy focuses on the types of advocacy skills that are necessary to successfully meet with professionals from the school system. It includes strategies to facilitate parental access to the school system and to increase awareness of the effects of parental attitudes and expectations on children's success in school. This project will also be useful to educators who are interested in assisting professionals to improve the success of parent/professional partnerships.

OBJECTIVES

Project Family Advocacy proposed to break the cycle of undereducation we saw evidence of by increasing parental awareness of their roles in their children's education and empowering them to become advocates for their children. This project also proposed to increase the awareness and sensitivity of professionals to parental apprehensions.

Our objectives were to:

1. Develop a model of strategies to facilitate parental access to schools and educational services and increase parental understanding of school district procedures and practices.

2. Improve parental communication skills and self confidence necessary for effective interaction with school administrators and delivery staff.

3. Increase parental awareness of the effect their expectations, attitudes and involvement have on their children's success in school.

4. Increase sensitivity of teachers and other professionals to parents' apprehension about interacting with the school system.

5. Increase educational interaction between parent and child.

Project Family Advocacy attempted to break the cycle of undereducation in the Clinton County area by working with both parents and professionals. The project staff developed a model for implementation of a parental advocacy program that can be used in conjunction with adult basic education programs in Pennsylvania.

Linda Hinman was the project director. She is employed by the Central Intermediate Unit's Development Center for Adults as a project coordinator for the New Choices program. Patricia Reynolds was the teacher involved in the project. She is also employed by the Central Intermediate Unit.

Permanent copies of this report will be on file with the Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education, Pennsylvania Department of Education, 333 Market Street, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 17126-0333, (800) 992-2283.

RECRUITMENT

Recruitment started with the creation of a flyer and a brochure targeting parents. The readability level of the brochure was kept below the sixth grade level to increase its impact. A sample of our brochure and flyer is in the project manual and available through AdvancE. In developing our literature, and throughout the project, we focused on staying neutral or positive. Both sides of the problem needed to be seen as legitimate and treated with respect.

Next, we launched our public relations with a press release and public service announcements distributed to the local radio station, newspaper and television cable company. An informational letter was drafted and sent to human service agencies. The letter was followed by a phone call requesting an opportunity to make a presentation to the their staff. Parent groups were also contacted by phone and arrangements were made to speak at their next meeting. Each presentation included a brief background and overview of the project, specific details about the parent classes, and a supply of flyers and parent class brochures. The following is a list of human service agencies and parent groups contacted:

Clinton County Children and Youth Services
Public Library
Clinton County Training Office
Parents Helping Parents
Clinton County Department of Public Assistance
Parent Teacher Organizations
Clinton County Health, Nutrition and Education Committee's Health Fair
Early Intervention Program
Clinton County Women's Center
Head Start Home Visitors
WIC Office
Community Association of Social Service Professionals Team
Parents Involved Network
Lionesses Club

To begin working with the professionals of the school district we contacted the superintendent by letter to explain the project and then called to ask permission to proceed with our plans. We were granted permission with

the stipulation that we involve the entire district in the project. With the superintendent's support we worked with the assistant superintendent and the supervisor of special services to get information and brochures to the principals, counselors, and teachers in each school. By participating in a district wide principals' meeting, we were able to distribute parent brochures to all the schools in time for parents at their November Parent Teacher Conference. This is usually the first parent conference of the year and is a district policy. To set up our meetings with the teachers and counselors, we contacted each principal to get on the agenda of their faculty meetings for each school they supervise.

At the Development Center for Adults we met with the teaching staff to explain the project. The project staff made presentations to the adult students enrolled in ABE/GED classes, the literacy program, Project Prepare (brush-up classes for individuals preparing for college entrance exams), GATB Brush-up (a program for individuals to qualify to retake the GATB test), the New Start Program (for dislocated workers), and the New Choices Program (a single parents/displaced homemakers program). The parent classes were coordinated with workshops and classes already meeting at the Development Center for Adults.

PARENT SEGMENT

Having worked with parents for several years the project staff had become aware of the parent's part in the undereducation cycle. With this knowledge we developed a curriculum to empower parents to advocate for their children. Having a clear picture of the issues helped us develop the activities and direct the discussions that would help parents affect changes in their attitudes and approaches. We felt a group situation would be the most effective format in which to deliver the information in the curriculum. Individual support and guidance was also available. A step by step manual of the curriculum is available through AdvancE.

After developing the curriculum, the Project Family Advocacy staff conducted parent classes for three groups of parents who met for 10 hours. Parent classes included lectures, activities, and presentations by parents. Activities and discussions included: communication skills, ways to get involved with homework, meeting your child's teachers and school counselors, students' rights according to state and federal laws, terminology used by school professionals, school district regulations and procedures, hierarchy of teachers and administrators within the school system, importance of parental attitudes and involvement in a child's education, parental responsibilities, peer stories from parents who have successfully advocated, role playing, and communication skills practice with VCR recording. A follow-up support group was scheduled to meet monthly after the completion of the parent classes in order to provide continued support for the parent's advocacy efforts. Because of lack of parent interest the support group did not form.

To meet the objectives of the project and to serve all parents interested in the time frame of the project, the parent classes were offered to parents of preschool children as well as school age children. Because of the diverse family make-up of the parents in the classes the approach was taken to apply the techniques to agencies and situations other than just the school system.

This approach proved very successful in respect to immediate use of the skills by the parents rather than in the future when their children started school. The immediate gratification of successfully using what they learned was a great motivator for the parents to continue participation in the classes.

Another notable aspect of the class success was individuals sharing personal stories dealing with the educational system and the techniques they found successful or that hindered their efforts. The increase in parent attention was extremely noticeable when examples were presented by parents as compared to those relayed by the project staff. The bond between the group members and the increased weight their words carried because of their personal and family similarities was obvious. It's worth noting when talking about the group similarities that, according to the questionnaire, 50% of the parents felt their parents were not involved in their educations when they were children.

The following parent comments were taken from the written evaluations done by the parents at the conclusion of the parent classes. These comments were incorporated as feasible in the classes that followed.

- The importance of "keeping your cool when everyone else has lost theirs" and the skills to use when talking to "important" people were felt to be very important points.
- The information presented was judged to be helpful in various facets of life in addition to the educational system.
- Techniques learned in the classes were helpful in dealing with a teacher's unjust labeling of the child.
- The curriculum and the amount of time spent on each topic was judged to be well balanced.
- Videoing of mock situations was felt to put the information presented in the class in proper perspective and was very helpful.
- One parent wanted a more extensive background on the laws concerning education.
- Members of the one small class felt the class size was an advantage because it provided the opportunity to share more personal situations.

- Talking through past situations with the class and exploring various options gave a good background from which to approach new situations.

- The classes were felt to increase individual awareness and confidence.

- It was recommended that every parent should attend Family Advocacy classes.

PROFESSIONAL SEGMENT

While parents were targeted for intervention, it was also evident that the professional staff of the school system had impact on the undereducation cycle. Through meetings with the professional staffs, we attempted to increase their awareness and raise their sensitivity to parents' apprehensions and reluctance to access and participate in the system. In addition an attempt was made to increase their awareness of assumptions they make consciously and unconsciously about parents. As the meetings with professionals progressed, we discovered that we hadn't had a complete understanding of the professionals' perceptions at the start of the project. It became evident that this was a much larger and more complex issue than we had realized. We found, through our meetings, we were gaining a clearer picture of the issue and that we were only going to be able to address a small part of it. We have included the information we gathered from the meetings with the school professionals in this report in hopes that it will be helpful to other educators who are planning to work with the professionals.

Permission to meet with school district personnel was obtained from the superintendent of the district and coordinated through the assistant superintendent and principals. We met with the teachers and counselors at their regularly scheduled faculty meetings. Each professional session started with an overview of the project and an explanation of the parent classes. In an effort to make the partnership between parent and teacher stronger, our goal was to share with the teachers the perceptions of parents and hopefully increase their sensitivity to those parental perceptions. It was vital that these perceptions be presented in a manner that would not offend or place blame on the professionals.

The professionals were asked to share their concerns about parent/teacher partnerships, any activities or approaches they have found successful in

encouraging parental cooperation, and their suggestions on topics that need to be addressed in projects such as ours.

We received a wide variety of reactions to these requests. The reactions ranged from total frustration with parent involvement at one school to the opposite opinion at another school. One common reaction at the beginning of most meetings was defensiveness on the part of the teachers.

Going into the project we were aware that parents often do not have a complete awareness of their influence in the education process, but we were surprised to find how much the professionals also lacked an awareness of their influence on parental involvement. Activities that foster positive parental contact were not found to be a regular part some schools' plans, or the activities that were in place were perceived as sufficient whether successful or not.

At times we were met with frustration, anger, indifference and silence. It appeared that the principal or supervisor of particular faculties had an influence on the responses of the teachers to our project. It became clear that some faculties work together as a team to find solutions to problems and others do not. The morale of the faculty seemed directly proportional to the positive comments they had about parent/teacher partnerships. The economic and social status of the students of the school also seemed to effect the teachers' perceptions of the difficulties of the parent/teacher partnership. Elementary schools that have a large portion of the student population living in low income housing perceived parent/professional partnerships very differently than the other schools. The faculties at these schools expressed frustration at the lack of basic parenting skills and the lack of good manners they saw on a daily basis. They encountered parents who were rude and mannerless at children's programs. They felt that many of these children lack basic nurturing and stability as well as educational support at home. They had students who move from house to house and have no primary residence due to

custody arrangements or the instability of parental life. There were no emergency phone numbers for the faculty to use when children were sick. On the other side of the scale, some faculties felt they had effective partnerships with parents. They had ideas to share and didn't feel they had any difficulties with these issues. We heard and saw many caring and dedicated teachers. While there were frustrations and difficulties, they also were aware of the positive environment they foster. They were looking for ideas and solutions to make stronger partnerships.

The following are some of the feelings and perceptions conveyed to the project staff during the meetings with school district staff:

1. Some teachers perceive parents as initially hostile or defensive when approached by teachers on the telephone or in person.
2. Some teachers didn't seem aware that their approaches to parental interaction were influential. They were not aware of the effect their attitudes and expectations had on parental reactions and didn't view the issue as their responsibility or a priority.
3. A number of faculties were concerned with making parents feel welcome and had procedures in place. Most didn't see a need for additional effort on their part. It appeared that little effort was made to go beyond the standard procedures. We feel this was not because of a lack of interest but rather due to the misunderstanding. Because the efforts being made were successful for some parents, it was perceived as a short coming of the uninvolved parents rather than of the method being used.
4. One group was concerned with the lack of stability in the home lives of their students and parental manners in public.
5. Low level reading skills did not appear to be recognized as a possible reason for parent's lack of response to teacher notes.

Teachers seemed to assume the lack of response was due to disinterest on the part of the parent.

6. Defensiveness was a common initial reaction among teachers when the topic of parent perception was introduced by project staff. As they started to realize we weren't there to lay blame, they were willing to discuss their perceptions and share their ideas.
7. Some faculties were very concerned with the lack of parental support concerning disciplinary actions of the school. Others seemed to want unquestioned parental support of their decisions and homework projects.

Issues that the teachers were concerned about and felt should be addressed in the parent classes included:

1. The teachers would like to be seen as human beings in and out of the school setting and not just reporters of the child's progress.
2. The importance of parental supervision of homework assignments and the reviewing of papers done in class each day.
3. The teachers felt the parents need an understanding of the "chain of command" and when to initiate action at the various levels of it.
4. It was suggested by one group of teachers that teachers compile a list of parent qualities that they feel are important in a successful parent/teacher partnership approach to a child's education. Once the list is complete, share it with parents stressing the fact that many of the qualities that parents are self conscious about (lack of education, menial jobs, poor housing conditions) do not appear on the teacher's list. Often what parents think teachers feel are important are misconceptions of the parents.

The following are techniques and activities the professionals use to make the parents feel comfortable when interacting with school personnel.

1. Happy Grams - written messages sent to the parent to share a students special accomplishments.
2. Phone call to share special accomplishments.
3. Weekly notes written on the top of spelling papers.
4. Evening hours for parents who can't meet during the day.
5. Greeting and chatting with parents in the hallways.

EVALUATION

Each of the project objectives was met, however some of the proposed procedures were modified as the project progressed to assure success. A model including strategies to facilitate parental access to schools and education services, and to increase parental understanding of school district procedures and practices was developed. A manual containing this model is available through AdvancE. A curriculum for parent classes was developed and successfully implemented. It addresses the objectives of increasing parental communication skills and self confidence, increasing parental awareness of the effect their expectations, attitudes and involvement have on their children's success in school, and increasing educational interaction between parent and child. The topics of the classes were useful to the parents in dealing with a variety of agencies and situations outside of the education system. As the meetings with the professionals in the school district progressed and we began to see just how complex an issue we were addressing, we realized we were not going to be able to make the impact we had planned. Therefore a major portion of the professional segment of this report is the information and perceptions we gathered on the issue. We hope the information we gathered will be helpful to other educators planning to deal with these issues with school district professionals.

Parents who had the opportunity to use the skills learned in the parent classes with school district professionals were pleased with the results of those meetings. Some parents made progress on long standing unresolved issues involving IEP's and discipline. Their success and the positive written evaluations done by the parents reflected the effectiveness of the curriculum. The parent class curriculum is available in the manual developed through this project.

Recruitment was the most difficult aspect of the project. Thirty-two parents were involved in the project. Thirty participated in the parent

classes and two were assisted on an individual basis. Making free classes available to parents wasn't enough to promote a high rate of parent participation. When the parent classes were coordinated with existing educational programs, the adult who had already been motivated to participate also became involved in this project. Another situation that spurred parental participation was when an educational crisis arose involving their child and school professionals. These parents preferred getting the needed information and coaching to get them through the crisis from the project staff on a one-to-one basis rather than spending time to attend classes.

Referrals from area agencies and the brochures that were distributed only resulted in the participation of 3 parents from the community. Our most successful recruitment was accomplished with parents already enrolled in various educational programs at the Development Center for Adults.

While we targeted parents of school age children, we accepted interested parents of preschoolers into the classes. Their evaluations said the classes were helpful in preparing for the future and many of the skills were useful in other aspects of their lives presently.

The lack of parental interest from the community led us to question whether our brochures, distributed through the schools were seen by parents as part of the educational system. We may have been seen as another part of a system that already made parents uncomfortable and therefore not perceived as being helpful..

We also found that, after attending the classes, parents didn't feel a need to continue with the support group. Some parents came in for follow up individual counseling, but the support group did not develop as planned. Follow up phone calls were not successful in recruiting parents for participation in planned support group meetings.

Evaluation of the parent classes was done through a comparison of pre and post questionnaires. Sample questionnaires can be found in the project

manual. Comparison of pre and post questionnaire results showed marked improvement in parent understanding of school district policies and procedures, terminology, and the importance of attitudes in a child's education. Written parent evaluations of the classes showed the classes to be helpful and encouraging. Feedback from parents who had teacher conferences after the parent classes was positive. They all felt their new knowledge and skills had an effect on the outcomes of the conferences.

Written evaluations were not done by the professionals at the conclusion of their meetings. It did not seem appropriate because of the short time we spent with each faculty in the district. Working with fewer faculties in more depth would have led to more measurable results.

The manual developed includes a step by step guide to the implementation of the project for use by other programs. There are sections on professional awareness, and teacher sensitivity, recruitment strategies, parent class curriculum, follow up activities, copies of all handouts, sources of regulations and information; a resource guide; and an evaluation of the success achieved and recommendations for changes that may make such a project more successful. The project manual is available through AdvancE.